Melodies That Live Many Lives

Wherein a New Theory Puts to Rest a Popular Belief

By FREDERICK C. RUSSELL

THIS composer of music holds that there are really very few melodies; that when a song has passed from popular favor and seems to have died, the melody comes back, to appear in a new song through the brain of a new author, and he cites many cases to prove his contention.

DO YOU believe in reincarnation? Well, whether you do or not there is one thing certain; melodies come back to life through the ages just as regularly as clockwork. They die, but they do not stay in the great beyond. There is no happy hunting ground for the soul of a song. Its form may go to heaven but its melody will return to earth again, sooner or later.

In this connection P. G. Wodehouse once wrote a lyric called "The Land Where the Good Songs Go." He eulogized this place in languorous terms and spoke of it as a land where no one worries and no one hurries, etc., finally ending with:

"And I hope some day
I can find my way
To the land where the good songs go."

I do not see how lyricists can write such innocent stuff. Anyone with a book knowledge of New York City knows in his heart that the land where the good songs go is that portion of the universe best known as Forty-second and Broadway. In the wee, small piano rooms of the music publishing houses that dot Broadway and the interesting streets, the souls of the good songs go. There they undergo the reincarnation process in the minds of the composers who are to give them re-birth while their musty and torn forms die natural deaths on the pianos of the girls of Ashtabula.

No, this is not going to be a discussion of the so-called "stolen song." Enough has been said on that subject, and most of it was all wrong. I have known of but few composers who deliberately took someone's melody and revamped it to their own liking. All of them do it, but not deliberately. Call it subconsciously, if you like; that is in keeping with the silent process of reincarnation. The great similarity between Chopin's "Fantasie" and Carroll's "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows" has caused no end of discussion. Everyone who discovered this fact smiled cunningly and remarked: "All the popular songs are stolen from the classics." That is the impression the general public gets when the similarity between a popular song and an old melody is discovered. But this is too snappy, and snap judgment.

Whether or not Carroll's song is an out and out case of revamping, it is the exception undoubtedly. One thing, however, is certain: he made a wonderful song out of Chopin's composition whether the idea was reborn in his mind or merely "lifted."

"Oh Boy!" Here Before

TAKE Jerome Kern, for example. In his compositions many a good hymn has found second life; or third or fourth life for that matter, inasmuch as the writers of the hymns no doubt were indebted to composers even before their day. "Till the Clouds Roll By" from "Oh, Boy!" for instance, is the fox-trot version of the Methodist hymn the lyric of which reads, "Oh, Day of Rest and Gladness." (A thought: perhaps this is the origin of the Princess Theater's run of "Oh" shows.) The time and form is different, but the theme of the melody is identically the same. And "You Found Me and I Found You" from "Oh, Lady Lady!" is no other than a Sunday school hymn that still does weekly duty for several denominations.

Now I can't imagine the resourceful Kern who gave us the "Same Sort of Girl," "Babes in the Wood" and the "Siren Song" "writing" the score of a new production with a hymnal open before him. The chances are it wouldn't be practical. Someone suggested that I try it myself, and I did. But none of the hymns gave me a single idea. They were all too "hymny," so to speak, while I was trying to write a fox-trot. Right here I made up my mind that the stories of composers lifting hymns, classics and other songs were untrue. I found from actual experience that a hymn is a hymn and a fox-trot a fox-trot. If you want to write a hymn you must get in a meditative mood; the reverse applies for the fox-trot. The more hymns I played the harder it was for me to get in the mood for dance music. Finally I gave it up as a bad job. And with it my idea that Kern had been pilfering the hymnals took flight.

When I had closed the hymnal and had switched off into some of the "latest," I suddenly hit upon a wonderful melody. I thought it was original and exulted under this impression for a week. When I played it for a friend he stated that it sounded exactly like something Kern had written five years before. That was enough!

Only Eight Notes to Work on

THEY say there are only thirty-six dramatic situations. As a consequence the poor dramatist is up against it for something new. It is no wonder that reviewers head their columns "New Plays and Old Plots." But what about the poor composer? Does he fare any better, with only eight notes and a few semitones? He has a pretty tough time of it. Small wonder that Louis Hirsch's "Bachelor Days," from the "Follies" of a few years ago, sounded like "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep"! Or that his melody in the "City of Dreams" from "Oh, My Dear!" once lived on terra firma in the form of "Me and My Gal."

Don't say there are eighty-eight notes. It sounds as though you're trying to sell a player-piano. The octaves only lend color and variety. Out of the eight notes a horde of composers must find the scores for musical shows, the popular ditties, the hymns, the dances, the symphonies and the operas. Not only that, but out of these paltry eight notes that—when played as a scale—would drive you to drink (if this were possible) thousands of composers must make a living. And some of them manage pretty well at that! Why complain? When they get tired of thinking up new variations of the notes, strike 'em, hit or miss and call it jazz? It's the last resort.

Nor is it any wonder that contemporary composers unconsciously use each other's ideas. Once a song or a composition dies its melody somehow or other absolutely refuses to stay in heaven. It comes chasing back to earth and usually finds lodgment in some composer's brain just as he is about to write a hit. The melody he subsequently turns off on the keys may seem to him to be all his, but not so. It is merely one of those melodies of the ages in its regular cycle of in again out again.

Unconscious Reincarnation

BREAD and butter comes easier to the lyricist of today. It was once held to be true that the words of a song could only treat of love, places and patriotism. Fortunately as love is a rather indefinite thing, to say the least, song writers got along pretty well for a time because their imaginations could go unrestrained. But P. G. Wodehouse, the late Henry Blossom, Otto Harbach, Irving Berlin and quite a few others have proven that the scope of lyric writing is larger than is ordinarily supposed. We have been running the gamut lately from songs about Bolshevists, the Rolls-Royce, stealing Sonoras from homes at East Aurora, etc., to whatnots. And the popular song writers have even resorted to discussions of timely topics, viz: "How y' Goin' to Keep 'em Down on the Farm?" and "How y' Goin' to Wet Your Whistle?"

The composer has no such scope. Unless he can get away with some sort of crime and call it music he finds a lot of set rules staring him in the face. Whereas the lyricist can write of "Helen—and the Dress She Looked Well in," and get royalties for it, the composer would lose out completely were he to try to jump from E flat to G sharp and then back again while playing in the key of C natural.

Plagiarism is a sadly overworked subject. There are cases, of course, where the unscrupulous would-be writer will run over the songs of a decade ago and pick out what he needs. He is usually not very successful for the reason that he is devoid of creative talent and thus adds nothing to the original. Rather he produces an inferior product. The writer, on the other hand, who unconsciously reincarnates the best there is in a melody and dresses it up in a new form that is better than the old, has, in my opinion, done something. "There is nothing new under the sun," as they say, but there are always new combinations and particularly better ways of doing the old things. A most interesting phenomenon of song writing is that the same idea may be reincarnated in the minds of several writers at the same time. An actual case is illustrative:

A friend of mine hit upon a melody which apparently defied comparison with anything else. He used the number in several amateur productions in the East and the Middle West. Several professionals had copies of the number, but it was not published. A few days ago I was playing over some of the numbers from the latest "Follies" production and was surprised to find my friend's melody occupying a conspicuous place at the end of Dave Stamper's "Sweet Sixteen." Now I can't imagine that Stamper would go to Philadelphia or Columbus, Ohio, unless he had to, and as the number was only revealed in those cities I am content to believe that the idea came to both writers' minds at the same time. And, who knows, perhaps someone wrote it long before Stamper or my friend were born. It's hard to keep a good melody down.

I was still further convinced of this when I played Stamper's "Tulip Time" from the same production. There are two lines almost identical with a melody lying on my piano which forms part of a song yet to see daylight. I know of only one producer in New York who ever saw the song, and at that he only saw a copy of the lyric. What grounds, then, would I have for going into court and all that sort of thing? Yet it almost looked as though Stamper had been keeping other people's ideas on file, to use them as he saw fit.

The ideas were on file in the land where the good songs go, which, as I have said, is merely the land where the modern composers re-launder them. Of course, in this case Stamper put one over on us by getting the ideas out on the market first. But that's part of the game; first come first served. The royalties are his.

Even Rudolph Friml, whose style is distinct from the other composers of musical comedy fame, has in his song "The Tune You Can't Forget" from "Some Time" a melody which harks back to "Those 'Come Hither' Eyes," a song which Julian Eltinge sang in "Cousin Lucy," a production of several moons back. Friml's new version is particularly reminiscent. It was a natural outgrowth of one form of his writing. Friml started a form of refined syncopation in his famous "High Jinks" number which he has gradually developed. Finally the style lost some of its novelty with the result that Friml tried to make up for it with melody. In his search for something new the old melody that had once served Kern came to earth again in the land where Friml writes.

This reincarnation of melodies is a peculiar process with which I believe the composers themselves are not any too familiar. But every now and then a melody comes to light which seems to defy comparison with anything previously written. We call it "original" only because, as you see, we have not lived long enough to hark back to the time when the melody enjoyed terrestrial popularity under another form.

A No-Strike Shop

THIS is a picture of Arthur Nash, of Cincinnati, conferring with his men about running his business. Mr. Nash was at one time a hod-carrier, later a preacher and after that a salesman. In all three capacities he got some good insight into human nature, which he is using to good advantage in running his clothing factory.

(C) Keystone

The principal thing that he learned is that the other fellow has his rights and his viewpoint and will respond if given fair consideration.

Last year, when many clothing factories were strike-ridden, Nash's men were on the job every day. They weren't receiving any higher wages than were others, and when wages in other factories were raised 20 per cent they stuck to Nash, even after he told them a raise was impossible until business improved. Nash believes the secret of peace in industry lies in good motives, friendly attitude toward employes and the Golden Rule. When in difficulty regarding some problem of the business, he always consults his workmen. His men look after the company's interest and expect him to look after theirs. When other clothing manufacturers granted a 20 per cent raise Nash showed his employes how much each suit cost him and what his profits were. He stated that they were making 200 suits per week at that time, but when production increased to 500 he would give them a 10 per cent increase and when production increased still further, another 10 per cent—all of which he has done.